

Renee, Book #1 (Part 1

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Category: Animorphs

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 1999-11-14 09:00:00

Updated: 1999-11-14 09:00:00

Packaged: 2016-04-27 10:38:33

Rating: K

Chapters: 1

Words: 6,232

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: The first book in my new series; Renee is introduced (definitely not done yet)

Renee, Book #1 (Part 1

~*~ Chapter One ~*~

My name is Renee.

I have been told that I am unusual in the manner of humans. I have been told by others that I am intelligent, by others that I am poetic, by others that I am beautiful, and by still others that I am a "reject."

I know but one fact of myself: that I am an orphan. My mother (the daughter of an Egyptian and a Spartan), and my father (a German) were killed in a plane crash when I was one, just after the three of us had moved to America from Egypt. I have two gifts from my mother that I still cherish -- a necklace with my name written in the ancient hieroglyphics of Egypt and a bracelet made out of pearls and gold, with pendants on which are inscribed the head of a famous Spartan, Leonidas. On one of the gold pendants, there is a locket of which the catch is barely visible. Inside, I keep two photos; one of my mother and one of my father.

The photos were taken just before the crash.

I missed them so much, even though I'd never really known them. All I have is a fleeting image of a lady and a man, smiling down at me as I murmured baby talk. The lady had long, raven-black hair and dark, dark eyes. The man was blond and blue-eyed, as pure Germans normally are.

My parents.

These thoughts raced through my mind as I crept through the dark forest. My bracelet and necklace glittered in the moonlight. The

pearls and pendants of my bracelet had a clear, musical tone as they hit each other -- one of the few sounds in the cold night.

I shivered slightly. Cold as I was, I did want to reach the clearing in the woods before I turned back. Through that clearing, I could see stars and the pale moon, illuminating the night.

I finally emerged from the forest into the meadow. I stared up, brushing my dark-blond hair out of my face with one hand.

Suddenly I started. I could feel the presence of someone behind me. The night did not feel so empty, and it was not quite as silent as it had been.

I collected my thoughts and moved behind a tree. Then I leaned one hand on the trunk of the tree and gazed out into the night that would be so dark to anyone else. My hazel-green eyes saw through it well.

I gasped.

A...deer? No. Blue-and-tan in color, the centaur-like being was just beginning to halt as it focused its two almond-shaped green eyes on the stars. The tail, so like that of a scorpion's, alternately tensed and relaxed.

It was easy to see that the creature did not belong to Earth.

If it was an alien, then that accounted for the extreme attention it paid to the stars. I felt a rush of sadness for a being so far from its planet. I could relate -- I've never enjoyed a special kinship with mankind since my parent's death. I barely think of humans as "my people."

Some secret voice within me murmured that this alien would play a large part in my future life. I wondered if I should reveal myself, or if I should stay hidden.

TSEEEEEEEERRR!

A hawk swooped down and landed in a tree. It was a red-tail, definitely. It began to preen its wings as it dug its sharp talons into the bark.

~Hello, Ax,~ it said.

I almost leaped away from the strange scene then, but I was fascinated at the thought of an animal possessing coherent speech of such type. It was not speech, exactly, but telepathy.

~Hello, Tobias.~

The voice of the alien was all I would have expected it to be: calm, strong, and sad.

~What's up?~

~Nothing to be spoken of. However, the sky is very clear tonight, providing an excellent view of...well, the sky is rather clear.~

~Your planet?~

~The star of the planet.~

It was, then, an alien.

~Ah.~

~I will go now. It is late, by your human terms.~

The hawk was human?

~Human terms? Hey, I'm a nothlit, remember? I share none of my old human terms. This isn't just a morph anymore, Ax.~

To summarize, my brain translated, that's not his true form. Or, at least, it wasn't. To morph: to change forms. The question was, how had this strange creature acquired the ability to do so?

~No, I should go now.~ ~Whatever you think, Ax,~ the hawk said with a movement resembling a shrug.

~Is there a meeting tomorrow that you know of?~

~Yes. A new technology -- something building on the AMR technology.~

~More anti-morphing rays? I thought the Visser had given up on that.~

~Apparently not. He's hired new scientists, I guess.~ There was a silent, bitter laugh. ~All I can say is that I'm not volunteering again.~

~No one would expect you to. Good night, Tobias.~

~Good night, Ax,~ the hawk...apparently named Tobias...answered. As for the alien -- Ax -- he turned and ran in the direction he had come from.

I stayed motionless for a moment, understanding one thing -- this would not be the last time I saw the two.

~*~ Chapter Two ~*~

I was walking in the woods the next day, trying to find, or at least sight, the two strange beings I'd seen.

I was just passing a barn when I heard voices.

"New Yeerk technology?"

"Not exactly new. Remember the AMR?"

"THE WHAT?! THEY'RE BRINGING OUT THAT STINKING --"

"Hey, you're scaring the animals!"

I stopped, my interested piqued. I could distinguish four voices:

that of a girl, a boy, a boy, and a girl. Four humans, all arguing about an AMR.

Wait. Wait. Wait.

The AMR? I had heard the same phrase last night in the conversation between the hawk and the alien! Did these four humans know about them?

I opened the door slightly and glanced inside. Sure enough, I saw the alien. I could see the hawk up in the rafters.

Then the other night had not been a dream.

"Shhhh!" a blond girl -- the first voice -- said suddenly. She pointed toward the door.

"What is it, Rachel?" the other girl, an African-American, murmured in a quiet tone. She gently closed the cage which she had been cleaning.

The two boys had not spoken. However, I could already distinguish them apart by the accents of their tones.

One of them flung the door open. I sprang out of the way.

"Hello," I said in my calm, soft way.

"Ax!" he snapped.

Ax. The name of the alien.

Suddenly the scorpion tail was at my throat. I nodded, being careful not to touch the blade. "Ax. And Tobias would be the hawk in the rafters."

They froze suddenly. I knew that I could turn and make my escape, but that would assure them that I was an enemy.

~She knows who we are!~ the bird muttered.

"No, not really, Tobias. I just saw the two of you talking last night. You mentioned this famed AMR, which I assume stands for Anti-Morphing Ray, according to the alien -- or Ax's -- response." I spread my hands in a gesture of peace. "That's all. I'm not trying to spy on you; I just heard the word AMR from inside the barn and wondered if you were discussing the same thing."

~Do we believe her?~ Tobias wondered.

The boy who had been screaming answered with a harsh laugh. "She could be a Controller for all we know!"

I shrugged. "I could be a Controller for all I know; it would help if I knew what a Controller was. And if I'm a danger to you, as I assume from your outburst, what is stopping you from destroying me?"

"Outburst?" he said, looking a little surprised. "You just sounded exactly like my teachers."

"That's off the topic, Marco," the blond girl cut in. I remembered that her name was Rachel. "What do we do about her?"

"Cassie?" the other boy asked.

"I believe her," the African girl, alias Cassie, said.

Instantly my brain kicked into gear. From what I'd heard, I determined that Marco was skeptical and cautious; the boy who had said "Cassie?" was the leader; Tobias, the bird, was skeptical as well, but in a lesser degree; Ax and Rachel -- well, they hadn't said quite enough yet. However, Cassie seemed to be a caring person. She was also good at understanding people. She met my gaze with a look that seemed to focus entirely on my eyes, not merely my face. I comprehended the fact that she was trying to read my ambitions, my goals, my motives.

Fortunately, I can give to my face any expression that I choose. Right now, it was completely blank.

I'm rather good at understanding people, as well.

I almost told them what I had discerned, just to scare them, but reflected that the idea would not be a good one. While a caring person, I'm also a rather scheming person. If you can wipe the sound of "scheming," as well as its prejudiced meaning, out of your mind, I'll explain the true meaning: to think and plan. I don't scheme for murder or burglary or any such thing. I just think and plan.

I kept my face blank, not revealing anything that I had learned. "What if you're wrong, Cassie?" Rachel countered.

"What if you're wrong?" she replied. "What if she is telling the truth? Would you kill her anyway?"

I raised an eyebrow almost imperceptibly. They spoke as if I was a captive in a cage, unable to resist. They spoke as if I was a stupid dimwit who could not figure out a route of escape. Meanwhile, I had already figured out an easy one -- drop, roll, stand up, and run. In the time it took for them to decide what to do with me, I could already have been far away.

But they interested me. I had no reason to run, as of yet.

"Her life or ours, Cassie, that's what it might boil down to," said Marco. "Jake, man, this could be bad."

There. The name of the last one. I now knew every name and almost all of the personalities.

Jake, Rachel, Tobias, Cassie, Marco, Ax.

"I must be missing something," I said a flutelike tone. "I have said almost nothing and yet, you label me as an enemy."

Jake looked at me in surprise. "If you knew what we are, you'd understand the suspicion."

"Oh, but I do," I replied. "Or at least what the hawk is." I focused

my razor-sharp gaze on him. Even beneath the hawk eyes, I could see the human. "A nothlit, isn't that what you called yourself? That, added to the information I gathered last night, would mean a person terminally in morph. Correct?"

"She's a Controller," Marco said flatly. "She has to be."

"If I am a Controller, I'm unaware as to the meaning," I returned. "I cannot help my own extent of knowledge; that is the fault of the hawk and the alien, not mine."

The alien looked at me with an alien expression. The eyes seemed interested. My speech was certainly unlike that of another human. Another might have said, "Hey, I don't know what a Controller is. I can't help what I know, man, that's your fault, okay?"

~I vote with Cassie,~ Ax said. ~Her story seems genuine to me.~

"One against her, and two for her," Cassie observed.

"My name's Renee. Not 'her.' "

"Renee, then," Cassie said with a nod. "Have you always lived here in America?"

"No." I smiled slightly. "Egypt is my country, though I barely remember it; I am not an American, and I never will be." Rachel considered a moment. "I vote with Cassie and Ax. Three to one."

Jake glanced from me to Cassie to Ax to Rachel to Marco to me again. Then he sighed. "Sorry, Marco, but I vote with them."

The bird had not voted. ~Jake, this means that we are using the blue cube.~

He nodded.

~Well, I vote yes.~

Five to one, I thought.

The alien withdrew his tail blade. I did not acknowledge it by so much as a nod.

Cassie smiled. "Welcome to the Animorphs."

~*~ Chapter Three ~*~

I had learned the full name of the Andalite: Aximili-Esgarrouth-Isthill. I had also received the morphing power. And I had also learned about the Yeerks.

Meanwhile, I was conforming my attitude from blankness to openness, all without revealing a single substantial fact about myself except a slight background.

Let's get this straight: I'm not a depressed psycho. I'm actually happy with my life. I liked most of the Animorphs. I just don't like

it when people learn too much about me. Maybe I've been hurt one too many times in my life.

Aximili seemed to take an interest in me. I was very different from Jake, the commanding leader, Rachel, the reckless blond, Cassie, the caring psychiatrist, and Marco, the skeptical joke machine. But the Andalite and I had much in common.

He seemed to operate on a higher level than the humans, like he already understood what they were talking about and wanted to think about more complicated things.

Unlike Jake, he was not interested in commanding other people. Unlike Rachel, he thought about something before he charged into it. Unlike Cassie, he was not a shrink. And Marco...well, they were opposites in just about everything. There were some similarities between Ax and Tobias, though.

I think that, in a way, I reminded him of his people. My speech alone set me apart from the Animorphs, and there were larger differences as well.

I figured all this out in the space of forty-five minutes.

"This AMR could be extremely dangerous," Jake told me for the two thousandth time. He'd already explained what it was, how it worked, and how they had outsmarted the Yeerks before.

"We've covered that, Jake," I responded. "Perhaps we should move on to a different point in which I am not as educated."

He blinked.

"Translation," I said with mild tolerance, "tell me something I don't already know. I believe that is how 'normal' humans would state it?"

"Uh...yeah...okay...um..."

~The Kandrona is the Yeerks' weakness,~ Aximili said, taking over. ~It plays a large role in their lives. Also, the biggest asset of the Animorphs is their anonymous identities; the Yeerks cannot be allowed to find out what they are. We can trust no one with the secret of our war.~

I smiled. At least the Andalite knew how to proceed to the point. "Understood. And that is why the AMR is so dangerous: if the Animorphs demorph, their secret is out. Not only what they are, but also who they are. This is added to the fact that, while a wild animal is hard to capture, a human is less of a challenge."

~She learns fast,~ Tobias commented.

~Those are, in fact, the main reasons that the AMR is dangerous,~ Aximili agreed. ~We tried to stop the plan before, and for a while the Yeerks accepted the fact that it would not work. However, now they would have different scientists and they could try again.~

"There is a larger threat," I said. "They may realize that the last

AMR truly was accurate. If so, they will realize that the fault was not that of the scientists, but that the hawk was the creature's true form."

"Why didn't we think of that?" Jake muttered.

"I will decline to respond," I said sweetly.

"Was that an insult?" Marco wondered.

"Possibly." I turned back to Aximili. "The AMR must be destroyed. But that is not enough -- they will still have the specifications, won't they? Everything must be destroyed. The entire site."

~Exactly.~

"Can we handle it?" I asked the others.

They all turned to Jake.

"I think so," he said finally.

I allowed a smile to break through. "Then, let's."

Jake focused his eyes on me for an extra instant, trying to figure me out.

Jake wore a look of weariness. Leaders have many decisions during a battle. Rachel looked excited, fierce. Tobias's face didn't betray much emotion -- he was a hawk, after all. Cassie looked concerned, hesitant. Marco looked like he was trying to think of a joke.

Would I embrace it, like Rachel? Repel it, like Cassie?

Or merely maintain my neutral expression?

I kept my face blank.

~*~ Chapter Four ~*~

I acquired a morph. Or morphs, plural, I should say. Panther, cheetah, northern harrier, rattlesnake, owl, seagull, dolphin, roach, and fly. Cassie suggested all of them.

I was beginning to relax and betray just a little more emotion, a few more facts about myself. Something about them told me that they would not pose a threat to me. I began to sink back into myself, to think that maybe I could trust them. Especially the Andalite.

I felt a shade of happiness. Normally, I am a happy person. I'm happiest when I'm by myself, but they were proving to be real friends. They had accepted me and welcomed me to their group. There was a circle of sincere friendship in the group, even between Rachel and Marco -- I'd already seen them teasing each other and had determined that it wasn't really a hatred of each other, just joking around.

I haven't seen too much sincere friendship during my life.

The panther and the cheetah actually ran up to me. It seemed to scare

Cassie, but I knew their motives; I've almost learned the language of the cats from my own cat, Cheetah. I am partially Egyptian -- one-third Egyptian -- and Egyptians have a high regard for cats. I don't worship them but I do love them.

The cheetah let me stroke her. I acquired it quickly.

I looked around. She didn't belong in this habitat, large as it was. She belonged in the wilds of Africa or India. She belonged free.

"Goodbye, Cheegirl," I told her. She purred a little.

I acquired the panther quickly. The same with the other animals, as well -- almost all animals love me.

"You have a charm with animals," Cassie observed.

"So do you," I said. She looked surprised that I would have noticed so quickly.

We walked home together. I really did like her. She reminded me of me.

"Where does Aximili reside?" I asked her.

"He lives pretty close, in what the Andalites call a 'scoop' in the meadow." She smiled. "He actually has a TV in there."

"That's strange," I said with a laugh.

"Do you remember your home in Egypt?"

"I left it when I was approximately a year old. I remember my mother carrying me up to the Sphinx and being fascinated. I remember the pyramids, a little..." I shook my head. "I have but one clear picture of my mother and my father. I barely remember them."

"What happened to them?"

I looked away. "They were killed in a plane crash about a month after we moved. They had left me with one of their friends because Mom...my mother...had a premonition about the plane. She said she thought maybe it would crash, but then she laughed it off. Still, she left me behind..."

"How do you know all this?"

"My foster parents told me about it."

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"I...sometimes I think maybe I'm wrong, maybe they're alive, maybe they survived...but they would have written. They would have called."

"Marco's mother was believed to be dead. Her death was faked. The truth is that she's a Controller. Perhaps that's the fate your parents met with."

I bit my lip. "No. They're gone. My only wish is that I could see them once...just once. Would they be proud of me, or disappointed? Would they smile or look away? I love them so much, but I know they're gone."

We walked the rest of the way in silence.

~*~ Chapter Five ~*~

I spent the night in the old, abandoned house where I liked to hang out. My foster parents and I do get along really well, but I like being by myself. They okayed the idea of me spending the night there, anyway, so they wouldn't be worried.

I spent the night in fitful dreams of terror. In one, I was right there as the plane crashed, helpless to do anything as my parents fell away. In another, I realized that my mother and father were Controllers, like Cassie had said would be possible. In another...

_ I woke up in a cold sweat. My parents were dead! The plane...it had crashed... _

_ "No!" I cried. _

_ "Shhh, honey, it's just a bad dream," a voice whispered. _

_ I turned on my side. Mom was sitting there on the edge of my bed, stroking my hair. _

_ "Mom?" I whispered back. I'd never really allowed myself to call anyone that... _

_ "Renee. It's just a bad dream, sweetheart," Dad said, sitting down beside her. _

_ I sighed in relief. Mom bent over to kiss my cheek and suddenly --
_

_ CRAAAASHHHHHH! _

_ The plane hit the ground hard. I froze. They began to fall away, gradually diminishing in size as they called my name. _

_ ~CATCH HER!~ a voice ordered in thought-speak. _

_ I was still frozen as an Andalite advanced. Not Aximili. It had to be Visser Three! _

_ I leaped up and ran. But...but there was an army of humans in front of me! _

_ "They're Controllers," my mother's voice called. _

_ "Mom!" _

_ "RUN!" _

_ I turned to run but then, from behind me... _

_ "Mom?" _

_ They were Controllers! My mother and my father...each holding a Dracon beam, flanking Visser Three. I couldn't move! I felt rooted to the ground. _

_ "It's just a bad dream, sweetheart..." _

_ My bracelet made a chiming sound as the wind brushed past it. The clasp of my necklace came undone and floated away with my bracelet on the wind. _

_ My only two gifts from my mother...and they were gone! I had to reach them. _

_ "Shhh, honey, it's just a bad dream..." _

_ "Mom!" _

_ I reached for the necklace and the bracelet, but they blew away.
_

_ "NO!" _

_ I was in a crib, staring up into the faces of my mother and father, giggling and cooing. They smiled back. "She's such a beautiful little baby," my father said. _

_ Mom...Dad... _

_ I was at PTA, walking up to receive my all A's medal. I smiled, searching the crowd for my parents...but I'd forgotten. I didn't have parents. _

_ I kept the smile on my face and walked back to my seat when the applause ended. A girl leaned over to whisper in my ear, "Hey, where are your parents?" _

_ I looked away. _

_ "Just a bad dream..." _

_ "Mom! Dad! Come back!" _

_ "Where are my parents?" I asked the two people who had brought me up. "I want to go see my parents." _

_ "Renee --" _

_ "Where are they?" _

_ They looked at each other and sighed. "Renee, we didn't want to tell you..." _

_ "They're dead, aren't they?" My voice fell flat in the room. _

_ My foster mother (Auntie, as I called her) nodded slowly. _

_ "Wake up, Renee," my mother's voice called. "It's just a bad dream." _

_ "No! No, it's not! You're dead!" _

_ "I'm right here, darling." _

_ "It's just a dream!" I screamed. _

_ I looked over my old cut-outs in my binder. On the first page, there was a newspaper clipping. _

_ "The airline went down over the Atlantic last night. Approximately 250 people were killed. It is --" _

_ I slammed the binder closed and threw myself on my bed, suppressing my tears as I always had. _

_ ~CATCH HER!~ Visser Three shrieked again. _

_ I jumped up off my bed and started to run. _

_ In front of me were my parents. They smiled at me and I bolted towards them. _

_ I threw myself into my father's arms...and fell. They were moving backwards. _

_ "Mom! Dad! Please, don't go!" _

_ "We have to, Renee," my mother said sadly. "It's just a bad dream..." _

_ ~CATCH HER!~ _

"MOM!"

My own voice startled me into waking from the worst nightmare I'd had in a long time. I sprang up off the floor, still partially wrapped in my sleeping bag. I fell back to the floor and disentangled myself carefully.

How had I known exactly what Visser Three looked like? How had I known exactly what a Dracon beam looked like?

The Animorphs had described them to me, I remembered.

I wondered what it was like for Aximili, knowing that his parents were alive...yet so far away...

There was a rustle from some part of the room. I looked around apprehensively, then saw my cat, Cheetah. Her tabby fur shimmered in the moonlight and her green eyes -- not so much unlike my hazel ones -- seemed intelligent and comforting. She purred slightly as I stroked her.

I acquired her. My bracelet bangled as my hand moved. I opened up the locket on the bracelet and glanced at the pictures of my parents.

Suddenly I jumped up and ran away as fast as I could. I had to get out of that abandoned house. I had to run. I had to do

something...anything...other than just sit there. Anything.

I almost hit a tree. I steadied myself, then leaned against it.

_Jingle jingle jingle. _

My bracelet! I could hear it jingling in the night. I looked down to see my mother's face, smiling and happy, seem solemn and angry in the gloom.

"Shhh, honey, it's just a bad dream..."

I ran faster, not knowing what I was running from. I didn't know where I was running. I was just running.

My bare feet felt broken. Sharp spears -- really pine cones -- seemed to lacerate my feet. I hadn't bothered to change out of my jeans, and for that I was grateful -- I was running through thorns and briars. My feet were bloody.

"Ah!"

I slipped in the mud and grabbed a tree trunk for support. The wet, slimy, cold ooze covered my feet. I stepped aside to find another place to stand and ended up stepping on a rose bush. I moaned in pain.

What was I thinking, charging out into the night with no shoes?

Suddenly there was a thunderclap. Lightning illuminated the night.

Rain began to pour down.

I had been able to see in the night relatively well, but the rain was making it worse. It stung the cuts on my feet and dampened my jeans. I smoothed my hair back over my shoulders and the moisture dripped off it down my back, down my jeans, and onto my feet.

I was so exhausted I could barely stand. I'd been running faster than I thought; I couldn't even see the house. I was far from it.

Gah-flump, gah-flump, gah-flump, gah-flump.

Gah-flump, gah-flump, gah-flump, gah-flump.

The sound was too much. I fainted.

~*~ Chapter Six ~*~

I opened my eyes slowly. I was vaguely aware of the pattering of rain and the crash of thunder. A bolt of lightning lit up the landscape.

I started to stand up. I was in some kind of shelter that opened directly to the outside. I could see the woods nearby.

Where am I?

I could see a rose bush not far away. That was where I had passed out.

Where was I now?

I turned around to view the rest of the enclosure.

I saw an Andalite.

I took a moment to recognize him. Aximili, I remembered. Yes. This must be his "scoop," as Cassie called it.

"Hello," I said calmly.

~Hello, Renee,~ he responded.

So that was the weird gah-flump noise, I concluded.

"Thank you," I said in an equally calm tone. I smiled tentatively. "The storm took me by surprise."

CRASSSSSSSHHHH!!!

(Thunderclap.)

~Earth storms are violent,~ Aximili observed.

"I'll leave now, I suppose," I said. "Thanks again."

~You don't have to leave,~ he protested.

"What time is it?" I asked. "It would be on the TV."

He flipped it on. The TV read 5:30 A.M. No point in going home, at least not now.

"It will be dawn soon," I said. "Are you...have you ever seen an Earth sunrise?"

~A few times,~ he said. He smiled the Andalite smile. ~And you?~

"Surprisingly enough, I've only seen a few in my lifetime."

In just a little while, I saw my next one.

The first thing to happen was that the grey morning lightened as first a pink, then an orange, and finally golden color rose above the horizon. We both gasped in unaffected awe. It had been so long since I had seen a sunrise that I had forgotten what it looked like.

A bright ball of flame rose, succeeding its heralding colors. It seemed to survey the landscape, then rose higher, satisfied that all was as it had left it.

The stars had slowly dimmed. Aximili watched them until they were no longer visible.

Now that morning had dawned, I became aware of hideous cuts down my arms. I remembered that I had fallen into the rose bush with all its thorns. My face was still smooth, I determined. I didn't know how I'd managed that, but I had.

My dark-blond hair swirled around me as I stepped outside. I cast a fleeting look over my shoulder to stare directly into Aximili's jade eyes.

There was a silence for a moment, then I smiled. In parting, I asked, "What name do you prefer? Ax or Aximili?"

~Aximili,~ he said immediately.

"Goodbye, Aximili," I said softly. "I'll see you later."

He smiled. ~Goodbye, Renee,~ he murmured.

~*~ Chapter Seven ~*~

Rachel took me shopping for a morphing outfit just before the meeting. I'm different from other humans in many ways, but I adore shopping.

"Okay, with your complexion," she said, eyeing the dark-blond hair and dark hazel eyes, "I'm thinking maybe a --"

"Black streaked with gold," I said immediately.

She nodded. "Exactly. They should be in --"

"The store over there, third rack from the left in the back," I replied.

Her jaw dropped. "You sound like me."

I grinned. We headed over to the store.

"We have a meeting today in how long?" I asked as I searched for just the right color. "I forgot my watch."

She glanced at hers. "About an hour and a half," she answered. "Are you done yet?"

"Not just yet." I considered a moment, then decided to say something. "What's Aximili like?"

She shrugged. "He's very serious, very intelligent, and very...strange...in human morph." She smiled. "All in all, your type."

"Strange in human morph? Excuse me?"

"Okay, other than that."

I grabbed the perfect leotard. Black, with silver and gold streaks. There was a band of dark green (that matched my eyes pretty well) across the chest.

"Perfect!" Rachel squealed.

"I take that as a compliment to my taste; thank you."

"We have to go shopping more often," she said as I payed for it.
"Cassie's great, but she isn't wild about shopping."

I nodded as I accepted my change. "Is that her over there? I can't see past the crowd, but you're at a better angle."

Rachel glanced in the direction of my gaze. "Yeah," she responded. "I wonder what she's staring at." I slipped away from the crowd until I could see. "She looks upset."

Rachel looked for the target of Cassie's gaping stare. "No!" she gasped suddenly.

"What?" I asked.

"David!" she hissed.

They'd told me about David. He was a rat. So what was she seeing, a rat in the pet store? I followed her look and raised an eyebrow when I saw a tall, blond teenager, about my age. Slightly taller than me (and I'm as tall as Rachel). Judging by Rachel's horrified countenance, I guessed that he was David.

And he was not a rat.

"We have to get the others!" she whispered.

"Go ahead," I responded.

"Don't go near him!" she cried. "He'll kill you."

I smiled. "You don't know me very well yet. Go ahead. If anything, I'll stall him from following you. Obviously he recognizes you. He won't even know who I am."

"Renee, no."

"Go ahead," I repeated. She finally left.

David followed her. In doing so, he passed me.

"Hello," I said a voice a mixture of soft, calm, and flutelike tones.

He turned, surprised. He narrowed his eyes, like he was trying to remember me. He shook his head. "Do I know you?"

I watched Rachel out of the corner of my eye. She was not yet out of the mall. "Maybe," I replied. "Are you David? David, the rat who should be on an island, trapped as a nothlit? David, the Animorph who attempted the extermination of the others?"

His jaw dropped. "What..."

"If so, I've heard of you," I said sweetly.

"You are an Animorph," he said flatly. "Be ready when the time comes

for them to turn on you."

Something about his face incurred my sorrow. He'd betrayed and been betrayed. He'd attempted to kill, and then been doomed. He'd attempted to hurt, and he'd been hurt. He'd attempted to trap the others in roach morph, and he'd been trapped as a rat.

The question was, why had he betrayed in the first place?

"I have to go," he muttered. He kept his eyes on my face.

"David, if you go, they'll just kill you," I said, surprising myself.

His eyes narrowed again. "Why would you care?" he asked in a tone not exempt from bitterness. "You'd help. They'd spin as many lies as they could to turn you against me, and you'd hate me like they do."

"Why did you turn on them?"

"I needed the blue box," he said. "I needed it to save my parents. And I still do."

"Your parents," I murmured. All the nightmares came flooding back. My parents falling away, my parents as Controllers...and the crash...

I closed my eyes, trying to block the memory out. I held my hand to my forehead...

_Jingle, jingle, jingle. _

My bracelet!

The clasp fell open. The locket opened.

He glanced at it with interest. "Who are they?" he asked.

"My parents," I said in a low voice. "They died in a plane crash when I was only a year old."

David snapped his head up. "They're dead?"

"Yes," I said in a husky voice. "I still have the most horrible nightmares..." I shook my head. I didn't need to tell him this.

But my parents were gone. His were not. And knowing the agony he had to be feeling, there was no way I could walk away.

"I have to go," he muttered again. Before I could stop him, he left.

Suddenly it hit me. He would go and he would find Rachel. She had been one of the most instrumental in capturing him. He would morph and beat her to her house. And then...

I made a split-second decision. I ran into a dressing room and changed into my leotard. I stuffed my wallet and clothes and shoes into a locker and double-checked the lock.

I probably looked strange in my run toward the exit of the mall. But I made it.

I ran over the concrete, heading for a small area of trees. The concrete tore at my tender feet, reminding me of the night -- morning -- before.

What if he captured Aximili?

My feet ran faster, in tune with the frantic beats of my heart.

I made it to the grassy plot of land bordering the woods. There was a huge stone in my path. I didn't see it until I fell over it. I ripped a long gash in my arm.

No matter. I'd be morphing anyway. I ran faster, ignoring the pain.

I leaped into the small grove of trees. No bystanders could see me.

I morphed.

My eyes changed shape and lightened slightly, the green taking over the other colors. The pupil narrowed and the iris widened.

My long fingernails curled and then lengthened. They thinned into cat's claws and sheathed themselves inside my fast-forming paws.

Tabby fur sprouted all over me. It was, ironically, gold, silver, and black -- the colors of my leotard.

I fell onto all fours and completed the last change. The cat's mind bubbled up.

_Well, Cheetah, _I thought, _I always wanted to know what went on in your little kitty mind. _

End
file.